The Galveston Daily News: Editorial

The practical question about public housing

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Published August 10, 2011

On Thursday, the Galveston Housing Authority will go to the city council and ask for $25 million in federal community development block grant funds originally allocated to rebuild public housing units destroyed by Hurricane Ike.

One of its proposals is that the council simply get out of the way. The city would return the $25 million in federal money to the Texas General Land Office, the agency that inherited the responsibility for handling disaster funds. The land office then would release the funds directly to the housing authority.

All kinds of questions are being asked about the housing authority's request. Is the housing authority trying to get around the council by convincing it to relinquish its hold on the purse strings? Does the council have any right to hold the purse strings? When it comes down to it, can the housing authority simply proceed with its plans?

To make sense of the housing authority's requests, it helps to know some history.

In April 2010, the state reached an agreement with two advocacy groups that complained Texas was not taking steps to further fair housing with federal disaster money.

The state originally saw Ike as a political opportunity to channel federal funds across half of Texas, including some areas that didn't get a hard breeze during Ike. Under the state's original plan, counties across a great part of Texas eventually could have used the federal money to repair infrastructure that had been neglected for decades, as opposed to using the money to repair damage from the storm.

The two advocacy groups, Texas Appleseed and the Texas Low-Income Housing Information Service, cried foul.

And officials with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development told state officials to revise their plans.

From Galveston's perspective, two things happened.

• A lot of federal money that would have been scattered across the state was redirected toward Galveston.

• Federal officials pointed out that it would be a good idea for the state to comply with the Fair Housing Act.

The state and the two housing advocacy groups were the parties involved in the conciliation agreement, which directs that 569 units of public housing will be rebuilt.

It's remarkable that people from Galveston played so little role in the conciliation agreement. Then again, it's remarkable people from Galveston played so little role in stopping the hijacking of federal money aimed at helping disadvantaged people who lived on the island.

When housing authority officials appear before the council Thursday, they will propose using about half of the $25 million to start building units on scattered sites. They're also proposing to proceed with plans for mixed-income

housing with a private partner, McCormack Baron Salazar.

In theory, the housing authority could rebuild all the public housing units required under the conciliation agreement on scattered sites. Under the public-private partnership, the private developer would build some public housing units — and that number would count against the required 569.

Would the council prefer all the public housing units be on scattered sights or is it open to having some rebuilt through mixed-income developments?

That is the practical question before the council — the question that it really might have some influence in deciding.